



Interspecies Newsletter

Winter

1990

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A Winter's Tale

I- The Writhing Hotbed

As a transplanted city-dweller, I had always imagined the sighting of a ~~mule~~ deer from my living room window to be the penultimate blessing of the rural life-style. Were I a non-gardener, it would certainly still be so. But those who work the soil see the world quite a bit differently from those who do not. For example, I never considered deer to be predators simply because I never considered plants to be prey. Now, despite the injunction put forth by non-gardening vegetarians about the supposed non-sentience of plants, this gardener views his turf as a writhing hotbed where hunter and hunted are constantly devising ingenious tricks to fool one another. Consider the thorns of a wild rose as nothing less than a convergent cousin to the spiked plates of a stegosauruss roaming the Jurassic plain. Likewise, the deer seems just about as lusty and vicious as any tyrannosaurus rex. Except, please, let's also regard that essentially humanized adjective, *vicious* to be nothing less than a dramatic synonym for the more naturalistic adjective, *hungry*.

It took the local mule deer two winters to discover my newly dug garden. One evening at sundown I watched her transfixed from behind the blind of my living room window. Actually, the female would have made an effective role model for Eve; gesturing tentatively, seemingly unwilling to believe that this vegetative Eden held no hidden devils waiting to lunge out should she make the wrong move. She stared at a young plum sapling for nearly a minute; finally grabbed hold of a branch with her teeth, ripped it loose, and immediately jerked her head up high to scope the scene as she gobbled it down. She took a single step backwards before cocking her ears forward.

Something spooked her. Was it a yard that offers too little cover? Or was it the smell of wood smoke that so permeates this rocky knoll at this time of year? No doubt a lit-up house also implies the potential threat of a nearby dog, although none lives here. Perhaps she spied me spying her from behind that otherworld of glass. Or was it, instead, common distrust of this uncommon winter feast laid out be-



Constance Perenyi

fore her senses? Here lay a culinary kingdom quite beyond her deerish imagination to grasp, all full of prune plum cambium, winter kale, and raspberry canes. The deer is a race whose every sense seeks after apprehension. Quickly now, she dashed into the woods and was gone.

From that point on, I inspected my kingdom every single morning right into hot June. As far as I could tell, she never returned. Had this visit been a one-time occurrence? I should have known better.

II. The Human Pet

Home gardening offers a painless diet for the bloated American energy machine. For just one example, eating local broccoli accrues the same kind of savings that one usually associates with buying a new car that gets 50 mpg. Look at it this way. Almost all of the broccoli consumed on the US east coast is actually grown in California. But broccoli grows splendidly on the east coast, if not through so many varied months of the year. Also, food grown in anyone's home organic garden uses no pesticides, no transport, no elaborate distribution system. It offers an accessible means to contain petroleum overconsumption while curbing the chemical poisoning of the countryside. Grow your own. Or if you're stuck living on the 99th floor: promote local broccoli by supporting local producers.

Gardening is healthy. This happens, not only because freshly grown produce contains more vitamins and minerals and less junk-food fats and chemicals; but also, because of what Wendell Berry describes:

At a time when the national economy is largely based on buying and selling substitutes for common bodily energies and functions, a garden restores the body to its usefulness – a victory, I think, for our species. It may take a bit of effort to realize that among modern achievements, perhaps the most characteristic is the obsolescence of the human body. Jogging and other forms of artificial exercise do not restore the usefulness of the body, but are simply ways of assenting to its uselessness; the body is a diverting pet, like one's chihuahua, and must be taken out for air and exercise. A garden gives the body the dignity of working in its own support. It is a way of rejoining the human race.

Gardening can also be downright Apocalyptic. One day it dawned on me that there was a hidden agenda to my gardening passion. I was one of those sober ants diligently working in preparation for an utter breakdown of

society. Should the petroleum industry collapse, should the trucks and planes that deliver food to market be exploded out of commission, should any or all of us be called upon to fend for ourselves; then my own family would still be able to set a healthy and sustaining table in perpetuity. This survivalist's concern vented itself through such positive outlets as my rejection of hybrid seed in favor of open-pollinated types; a measure that makes good sense as a means to win a few more degrees of independence from a food distribution system I loved to distrust.

But I also found myself thumbing my nose at this breakdown, as if daring it to come. For example, I went ahead and expanded my bed of Jerusalem artichokes only because this marginal crop shows almost nothing above ground from late fall until mid-spring. In other words, the tubers grow deep enough to escape the initial onslaught of, you guessed it...nuclear fallout. Should the Apocalypse come, then I would be prepared for the worst. Go ahead, let the roving Mad Max gangs of future food pirates do their worst. They would never find my little larder of Jerusalem artichokes. It's true, I thought those thoughts.

III. four-legged policy

There I stood, prepared for the worst: Mad Max, nuclear fallout, chemical poisons, atom bombs. However, I was not prepared at all for the *realpolitick* as represented by the February onslaught of that delicate mule deer. By the second year she had evidently discerned that no dog shared the premises. Better yet, no human had yet challenged her with guns, arrows, slingshots, rocks, or any of the projectiles favored by such as I in combatting an incursion by such as she. In the interim she also devised an ingenious browsing strategy based on the on again/off again status of my own house lights. Like the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, she attacked as we slept.

The raids commenced in late February. The three deer – yes, she had unscrupulously upped the ante by giv-

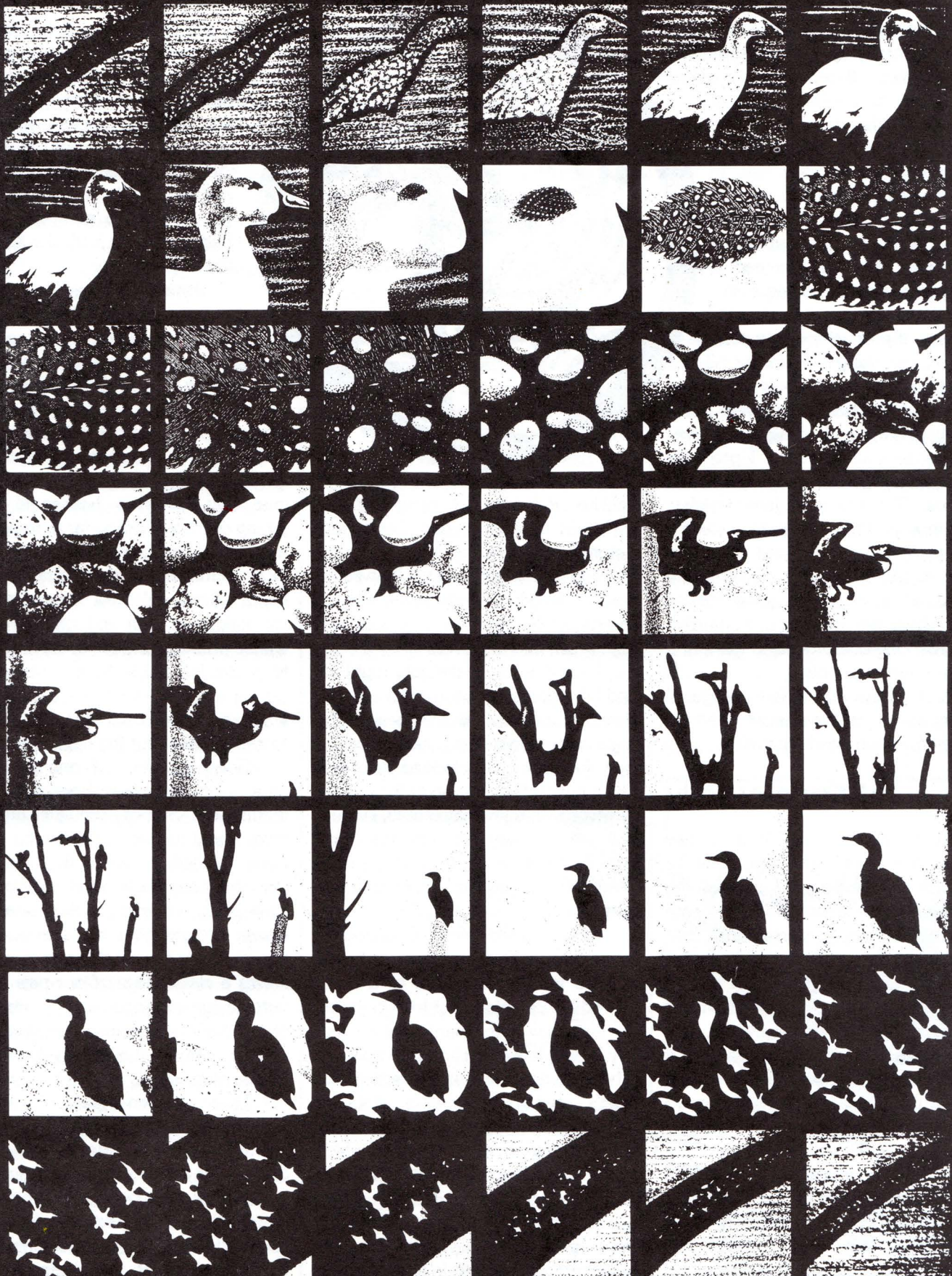
ing birth to two speckled fawns – destroyed four beds of chard, kale, lettuce, cauliflower, and cabbage, in a single night. Inspecting the damage the next morning, for the first time in my life I was moved to consider the conceptual implications of first owning and secondly shooting a shotgun. Luckily, this Rambo solution soon passed.

I retaliated by building a seven foot fence around my vegetable patch. Although it immediately solved the problem of protecting the vegetable beds, I still had a long way to go to safeguard the many smaller beds that proliferate my eccentrically landscaped property. My Property? Is that what it was? Had I become so vain as not to recognize the interspecies irony implicit within that contrived term, *property*. Here was a human, legal device invented to describe a skin-deep layer of earth measured and plotted onto a surveyer's map for the primary purpose of legitimizing my so called "claim" onto the local tax register. The doe and her twins were trespassers. They not only broke my heart, they broke the law as well.

The deer obviously disagreed with this two-legged elitists' policy. Her every action pleaded, instead, for an interspecies approach to ownership which goes something like this: *whereas all species share land to their own best ability to survive upon it, none of them own it.*

Being a normal, Westernized, human being, I found it impossible to abide by her four-legged land policy. Everytime she ravaged my tulips, I consistently redounded by fantasizing ingenious punishments. Multiply these petty fantasies of mine by the everyday reality of elephant herds tromping through plantations in Zimbabwe and it soon becomes apparent how this gardener's dilemma also describes the mass extinction of species in a world overpopulated by human beings.

I soon noticed a pattern to the deer's predation. One night she bounded up onto the rocky knoll and banqueted her way through an unfenced bed of yellow and red "Juan" tulips rimmed with sweet



METAMORPHOSIS

william and primroses. Someone in her entourage obviously enjoyed the repast because they all returned the very next night to continue browsing through another tulip and sweet william bed. What was it about these specific plants?

The next morning I picked a tulip leaf and turned it over in my hand. It was a substantial thing, pea green and exceedingly succulent. So, feeling a bit like Alice trying to decide whether the mushroom would make her precisely three inches tall, I went ahead and took a bite. Surprise! The leaf was sweet and savory, perhaps a bit stringy, but essentially as tasty as anything I grew for winter salad greens. Next came the primrose. This one was utterly tasteless even though it physically resembled a miniature romaine. I was less sure about trying the sweet william. The cherry-red, lance-shaped leaves looked like nothing else endemic to the human diet. Just one bite proved to me that it was as bitter as it looked.

And except for a few staggered commando raids, the deer avoided my garden for another whole year.

IV. Spooky Folly

By the next winter, I expected her arrival. Not to be disappointed, at 10 PM one clear evening, I opened the door only to come face-to-face with my garden's February persecutor. She stood in the moonlight quite alone, and not more than twenty feet away, staring at me through huge doey eyes from the perimeter of the primrose bed. We watched each other for what seemed a full minute. What was it about this beautiful animal that made me so utterly unwilling to share a few meagre greens during the coldest month of the year? As I pondered this existential question about control, the deer grew accustomed to my presence. She must have sensed my own hesitation because she soon tested it by dropping her head to yank off a bunch of sweet william leaves. Something snapped. I bolted from the doorway like a



banshee, determined to jump that deer if I could only catch her. Catch her? Before I had even gotten so far as the top step of my front porch she was already a hundred yards down the hill and gracefully loping over the four foot high brush into the forest.

I stood there in the cold night air and felt a glimmer of admiration for the sheer exuberance of the beast. The night was warmer than usual, a hopeful sign that spring was indeed nearby. I had a hunch that as soon as the normal forest growth rejuvenated itself, I would not see my adversary except infrequently, until next February. So I sat down on the top step to surmise the options.

Firstly, I could selectively choose to plant only those flower species undesirable to the taste buds of a deer. Daffodils, delphiniums, Iris, poppies, are just a few of the plants that no deer in my yard has ever chomped upon. In other words, I would disregard the deer's predation; planting whatever struck my fancy, and actively encouraging her to help me decide which plants would flourish and which would turn into deer browse.

Secondly, I could scare the deer away permanently. A resolute dog would accomplish that in no time.

Or thirdly, I could take a hint from any of several traditional cultures as well as the more optimistic of my

friends, and attempt to "talk" to the deer ear-to-ear and mind-to-mind; reason with her, politely ask her to refrain from eating my cultivated beds; perhaps explain in plain language how much pleasure those blossoms always bring to my family. Why not strike a bargain? Offer to plant a special bed of tulips in trade for leaving the rest in peace?

Instead, I chose to reenact the spooky human folly of destroying an environment in the hopes of making it serve us better.

I chose the dog. So commenced a campaign to ease the idea of a new canine family member with both wife and daughters. I started appraising the neighbors' dogs, weighing which pedigree best served a household with young children. I got so far as to put on my coat in anticipation of a trip to the local pound. But at that point, keys in hand, I finally relented. Reward a dog for barking at man and beast? A dog whose primary purpose in life amounts to protecting tulips from a little deer during the few months of the year when the woods offer little else for her to eat? What about the other months?

Good question, if one that not enough of my neighbors ever ask themselves. Stories circulate around town about individual dogs who have been trained to keep deer out of gardens. They skulk off at midnight to form packs, reverting to their feral ancestry, hamstringing half-starved deer before finally tearing them to pieces. It seems a classic case of our pets inadvertently generating a savage metaphor about how we humans exploit and devour nature: the big bad human poorly disguised as the big bad wolf.

There are even a few of my neighbors who honestly believe that a deer accrues more value dead than alive. Some of them go so far as to declare, by deed if not by self-incriminating words, that certain animals like deer and ducks and rabbits necessarily exist as a function of that strange term: game. Game is a game is a game. A living deer gets redefined as a living target, best met with a loaded gun, and

oftentimes, whether it officially be deer season or not.

Instead, I bought a firecracker. And for the next four nights in a row I systematically rose from my chair during half hour intervals just to crack open the front door with matches in one hand and an appropriately named jade garden salute in the other. When my wife asked what on earth I was doing, I replied sheepishly, 'hahahaha, just wanted to give the deer a fright.'

I stood behind the door feeling unmistakable twinges of guilt creep over me like a slimy disease. After all, whether we resort to nuclear bombs, dogs, or jade garden salutes, violent solutions are less fundamentally a manifestation of our power than of our anxiety. In this case, a desire on my own part to recreate the peaceful alternative lifestyle regurgitates itself as an undeniable statement about interspecies war. Kill for peace.

The deer reacted to this secret threat accordingly. She vanished altogether. How did she know what I had in store for her? Did she 'feel' me behind the door? With my sense of credulity stretched to the breaking point, I had to wonder if I had inadvertently, and quite unconsciously, tapped into the original plan number three: that of discussing the issue mind-to-mind. I went so far as to consider my own stubborn fury as an example of what the psychics call *focused attention*. Yet somehow that made no sense because, everything so far seemed like a classic case of *miscommunication*. I would be lying not to admit that my own linear education made this supposition as difficult for me to swallow as a bowl full of sweet william leaves.

With the current situation beyond my grasp to comprehend, I relented by spending the next evening immersed in a video of *Platoon*. And of course, the deer returned. She waded across a distasteful daffodil bed before commencing her task of granting my sweet williams a crew cut fit for a training camp recruit. Is it possible that she knew I was too busy watching *Platoon* and so would not reach for the jade garden salute? Who dares declare what

she knew or didn't know?

On that inscrutable note, permit me to bring this entire affair back to ground level again. After all (and despite the shrouded glamor we assign to telepathy), the special parameter of this description is not so much that the deer was stealthy, intuitive, or even 'intelligent', but that the relationship, itself, was evolving to include *neighborliness*. For three years now, my anthropocentric advocacy had excluded the deer as a key member of the same ecosystem upon which I built my home. Now, quickly comes revelation; and hurting the deer acquires the same attributes as a baseball fan shouting 'kill the umpire'. But when you kill the umpire you kill the game. Kill the deer and you destroy the environment.

All to mean that the role of the little doe had suddenly metamorphised from a thief to an arbiter of spiritual ecology. When we work too hard to build our world outside the loop of nature, we lose sight of a fundamental ability to see the loop for what it is: the central glorious fact of our existence. Likewise, the flourishing relationship between gardener and deer offers a doorway opening onto a deeper level of that same natural system to which I had long sought admittance as a planter of flowers, trees and vegetables. Acknowledge that, first. Then, and only then, start to regard the formidable intuitive capabilities of a mule deer.

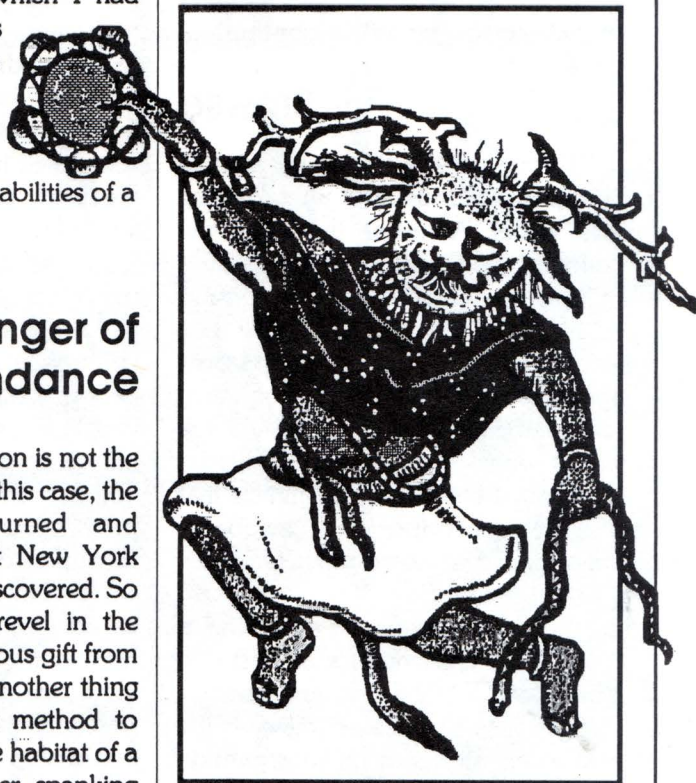
V- A Harbinger of Abundance

Unfortunately, revelation is not the same thing as solution. In this case, the deer returned and returned and returned. Like the toniest New York Cafe, my yard had been discovered. So it seemed one thing to revel in the deer's proximity as a precious gift from a gifted being, and quite another thing to deduce some working method to nurture a garden within the habitat of a tyrannosaurus rex and her spanking

new fawn. She had given birth again.

But as I say, I was noticing that she never touched certain plants. She avoided the entire *ranunculus* genus, including the anemones, delphinium, peony, and columbine to name just a few of the better known species. Neither would she eat rhododendrons, marigolds, lillies, tomatoes, potatoes; in fact, a veritable country garden full of flowers and vegetables. This observation provided a glimpse into a more far-sighted strategy for replanting my ravaged beds. For instance, because the potatoes seemed safe, (the leaves also made me feel queasy when I tried one) I planted them outside the garden fence. Likewise, I surrounded my young fruit trees with the nearly pharmaceutical aroma of self-seeding poppies and wormwood.

What I had stumbled upon was the first tentative stages of what is properly known as a *permaculture* garden. This is a horticulture that favors the permanent approach by minimizing artificial primping by a human overseer. Choose the garden to fit both the contours as well as the predators of the land. Tend to the soil and let the garden grow itself. With luck, my great-great-



East Indian Deer Shaman

great-great-great-grand-children will still be gardening alongside the progeny of that little doe. Consider permaculture as agriculture fit to feed the seventh future generation down the line.

As you can see, my attitude was jumping through fire hoops. Last January, with fruit overflowing my family's winter larder, I went so far as to lay an entire bushel of half-turned apples beside one of the deer paths. I snickered to think she might get tipsy from eating too many. Actually, she ate every last one of them within 48 hours.

One naturalist neighbor offered a counterpoint to my newfound benevolence: opposing the gift as my own inadvertent attempt to tame and thus endanger a wild animal by turning her into a dependent. I wasn't so sure. To lay a gift at the feet of a deer once a year seemed more an act of co-evolution than of subservience. I preferred to treat my action as the contemporary heir to the Huichols of Mexico who honored the deer as a harbinger of abundance. Or of the ancient Chinese who admired the deer as a teacher of communication within the supernatural realms, a creature whose existence actually necessitated a yearly gift-giving. These are the same attributes that had co-evolved in our own relationship.

VI- Browse

February 1989. It has been a brutal month of blizzards after an otherwise mild winter. As usual, the tulips, the daffodils, the iris, all had a few inches of greenery thrusting above ground when the storms struck. Now two weeks later, the edges of their leaves are obviously frostbitten, although they have started to grow again. And my winter vegetable garden? Until the storm hit, it had seemed a miracle that provided parsnips, kale, cabbage, beets, and even some romaine lettuce into late-January.

But winter gardening must remain the ultimate challenge for at least one more year. Only the leeks and parsnips seem to have made it. As always, the Jerusalem artichokes growing outside the fence have produced far more tu-

bers than any of us could possibly eat. Despite Mad Max, I plan to cut that bed in half this Spring.

I sat at the word processor this morning in an attempt to put the cap on this story. By noon I had saved the file, left the computer humming, and walked into the kitchen to fix some lunch. A woodpecker, a jewel of a creature saddled with the zany name of *red breasted sapsucker*, contentedly bashed its brains against a douglas fir just outside the kitchen window. I watched this strange variation on the universal theme of working for a living, only to have some movement at the opposite end of the yard steal my attention. Two deer were browsing their way across the knoll. These were newcomers and, at this distance, appeared larger than the little doe. I guessed they might be her twins; now grown up and educated to ravage my February garden on their own behalf. I also noted just how unperturbed the deer seemed in the face of the woodpecker's raucous drumroll. By contrast, when I started to wash the dishes, I dropped a spoon into the sink. The clatter brought the two deer to full attention, despite the barrier of a double pane window.

A deer is said to browse, and does not forage, or even graze. They take a few steps, drop their heads and bite off whatever looks promising directly in front of their face. Then they sharply raise their heads, scope out the lay of the land, cock their ears, eventually take a few more steps, drop their heads again and grab hold of another bite. It seems not unlike browsing a library.

A half an hour later the two deer still browse, although they also seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time licking each other's face. They are munching on grass, madrone leaves, and even the first tender growth from a patch of *my* Canterbury Bells. They step up alongside the plum tree, take a whiff of the *Irish Spring Soap* hung up as deer repellent, and quickly move back to the canterbury bells.

I stand by the picture window observing them slithering their tongues inside each other's huge ears. Is it love, lust, or grooming? Or perhaps it is only

salt they crave.

The male spots me through the window. He is looking right at me. I freeze. he moves sideways and cocks his ears. I keep staring directly into his eyes. The female keeps licking his ears. The male widens his eyes and freezes as if uncertain what to do next. He bolts. She bolts. Clomp, clomp, clomp, they bounce across the rocky moss of the knoll, and finally down the hill. Gone.

The woodpecker keeps on knocking. Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock-knock...

NOTE: This story is an abridged version of a chapter from Jim Nollman's new book, **Spiritual Ecology: A Guide to Reconnecting with Nature**, to be published by Bantam this Spring.

Three Good Books

■ *Sea of Slaughter*, Farley Mowat, Bantam books, 1986, paperback,

■ *Beyond Geography*, Frederick Turner, Rutgers University Press, 1986, Paperback.

■ *America as Seen by its First Explorers*, John Bakeless, Dover books, 1961, paperback, \$7.95

The environmental crisis did not start with the Industrial Revolution. Instead, it has been developing over a much longer time frame; slowly gaining momentum for at least the past 600 years. And like the Japanese film, *Rashoman*, which reconstructs a single murder from several different points of view, each of these three books also takes one particular point of view for retelling the history of species murder in North America. That history offers a prelude for the crisis we face today

Sea of Slaughter is the grimmest of the three, mostly because Farley Mowat writes with unabated fury as he chronicles the historical passing of the

IC News

■ IC is unique. It may be the only organization in the world with a research program dedicated to interfacing with wild animals through a blend of music, art, science, and ceremony. This holistic approach is both crucial and contagious for these times we live in. It promotes a deep *perceptual* transformation in human beings as the only longterm means for healing planetary degradation.

Not surprisingly, this unorthodox recipe also means that IC has been falling through the cracks of most traditional funding categories for years now. For example, we recently applied to a large foundation known for funding both the arts as well as the environment. The communications officer responded to our query by noting that IC was obviously an *educational* organization and thus, not even eligible for deeper scrutiny by their grants committee. Ironically, that same week also delivered up a similar notice of basic ineligibility from a foundation that focuses its largesse entirely upon educational programs.

This organization has flourished for twelve years now, mostly because it operates on a shoestring while continuing to engage a small number of *private* sponsors who support our programs and field projects. But longevity is always going to be a relative term as it applies to the relationship between non-profits and sponsors. That means that we are currently in need of finding a few *new* angels to bolster the IC operating budget for 1990.

On that note, we wondered, why not ask you our readership for suggestions? After all, you already hold an understanding about our programs. You also represent just about every state as well as 25 foreign countries. This newsletter is also sent out gratis to well over a hundred environmental groups, animal rights groups, art groups, media, magazine, and scientific institutions. If anyone can recommend possible sources of funding for IC's patently non-categorizable program, it will be much appreciated.

animals who once populated this continent. This book expresses a passionate sense of mourning; and after the first five chapters you may get very depressed as you realize that the story of the demise of the penguin-like Great Auk reads just about the same as the history of the demise of the polar bear from New England, or of the wolf who once flourished just about everywhere. The animals are gone, probably forever. Finis. It's done. This book is their elegy.

America as Seen by its First Explorers tells the same story, this time focusing upon the fantastic abundance witnessed by the white "discoverers" of this continent. If Mowat's book is morbid, then this one is tantalizing in its scope because it reads too much like a surrealistic description of Eden. Who can quite believe, to quote just one of many such examples, that Champlain sailed along the coast of Maine in 1604 and "not a day or a night passed we did not see less than 1000 dolphins." In fact, the richness of that distant tapestry now seems so beyond our current context, that the book leaves us feeling both enriched by what was, as well as saddened by what's left. Here is an environment gone forever. It's done. This book is its elegy.

Beyond Geography, Frederick Turner's version of the story retells the spiritual history of the European conquest of North America. Turner asserts that the destruction of this untamed continent was, in fact, a holy war. Ultimately, the conquerors never found satisfaction on these wild and verdant shores, because the traditions from which they sprang were founded upon the concept of Earth-as-devil. European religious culture had long been corrupt because it was based upon the medieval terror of the Crusades, and the Renaissance intolerance of the Inquisition. *Beyond Geography* chronicles the way that moral bankruptcy got translated into a new holocaust for a new continent. For example, Columbus' very first log entry upon meeting the Arawaks on October 12, 1492 reads:

They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appeared to me to have no religion.

By comparison, the spirituality of the native cultures, (including the disguised no-religion of the long-extinct Arawaks), was based upon a respect for the land, for community, and for a sense of place. Turner's book is riveting, especially when he reaches the monumental conclusion that the merging of European intellectual prowess with Native American spiritual ecology was and is the single greatest lost opportunity in the history of the world. Now, as we contemplate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing, the legacy of his horrific conquest leaves us little to celebrate with honor.

And all together, these three books written by three different authors, each working under three different publishers, offer the very best background anywhere for comprehending how and why the environmental crisis ever developed. Actually, somebody should figure out a way to get the three of these books reissued as an inexpensive boxed set. Most of all, let's make sure that they get smuggled into every high school history class in North America.



Lemming